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ARTICLES:

(1) Editorial on the Upper-House by-election: Each vote will set the course of the nation

OKINAWA TIMES (Page 5) (Full)
April 17, 2007

The campaign for an Upper-House seat in the Okinawa by-election show Aiko Shimajiri (42), a new candidate endorsed by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the New Komeito, is somewhat ahead but Yoshimasa Karimata (57), another new candidate endorsed by the Social Democratic Party (SDP), Shadai, the Japanese Communist Party (JCP). Minshuto (Democratic Party of Japan), and the Kokumin Shinto (New Peoples Party) is catching up.

The situation became clear when a telephone-based opinion survey was carried out by the Okinawa Times and the Asahi Shimbun among eligible voters in the prefecture, April 14-15.

Together with the Upper House by-election in Fukushima, the two races are seen as preliminary skirmishes before the main event, the election for the House of Councilors this summer. The ruling and

opposition camps are clashing, using every effort to win. Last Sunday, April 15, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Minshuto (Democratic Party of Japan) President Ichiro Ozawa and other senior politicians came one after the other to Okinawa to campaign on local streets.

Since the results of the two by-elections will reverberate in the main election, setting the country's policy course on such issues as constitutional reform, we would like everyone to fully understand their importance and vote without fail.

As for the main points of the survey of the situation, over 30% of the voters had not made up their minds yet, both camps can be expected to wage fierce battles until the final stage. The peculiarity of this election is that both candidates in their policy debates placing more emphasis on livelihood issues than on US base issues. There has been a change in the voters' consciousness toward giving priority to their daily lives. When asked in the poll which should carry more weight in the campaigns, livelihood or base issues, 64% of respondents chose "livelihood," and only 15 chose "base issues." The preference of voters of stressing daily issues, such as economic recovery, instead of base problems was loud and clear.

What should we make of this development?

Perhaps the residents of Okinawa are experiencing a sense of fatigue, for although over 10 years have passed since the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO) Agreement, the base problem has still not been resolved, with the issue of relocating MCAS Futenma bogged down.

The reason for stressing the livelihood issue is a little unclear, but it indeed has been an important matter for many years in

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Okinawa, where the prefecture's gap with the mainland in incomes and economic development never goes away. We would like voters to cast a scrutinizing eye on the livelihood policies of candidates Aiko Shimajiri and Yoshimasa Karimata before voting.

In the poll, 22% answered that they were "greatly interested" in the election, and another 59% said that they were "somewhat interested," making a total of around 80%. However, can we conclude that such high interest will be reflected in the actual voter-turnout rate?

Looking at the support rates of the parties, we find 42% answered that they had no affiliation. Another 19% said they could not answer or did not know. So about 60% of the electorate are floating voters.

The expansion of unaffiliated voters is the flip side of popular distrust of politics. What is being questioned is not only the consciousness of voters but also the significance of political parties. However, this time, there is no doubt that the moves of unaffiliated voters will determine the turnout rate and be key as to who wins or loses.

(2) US sounds out Japan on reorganizing sub-cabinet economic dialogue, with future FTA negotiations in mind

Jiji Press (Full)
April 14 2007

Washington. US government officials revealed on April 14 that the Bush administration has sounded out Japan about reorganizing the Japan-US sub-cabinet economic dialogue. The concept being considered within the US government would launch a bilateral economic strategic dialogue at the cabinet level, with an eye on changing it in the future to negotiations to reach a free-trade agreement (FTA). Although Japan is negative about revising the sub-cabinet dialogue, fearing that such would lead to agricultural liberalization, it seems likely that the question of how to build a new framework for economic talks will become a major challenge between the two countries.

According to US government officials, the sounding out by the US

took place immediately after the sub-cabinet dialogue held in Washington on April 6. At the time, the US, out of consideration for Japan's situation of holding Upper House elections this summer, avoided reference to specific contents about the reorganization, limiting its comment to the expression, "more ambitious economic talks."

The sub-cabinet dialogue, consisting of vice-ministerial-level officials from relevant ministries and agencies, started in 2001. In the talks on April 6, the participants took up such subjects as the new multilateral negotiations (Doha Round) under the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the issue of US beef exports to Japan. However, the view has set in within the US about these talks is that "they have lost their momentum." A US government official stated: "We have a keen awareness that for the world's largest and next largest economies to go along this way is a problem." Compared with political and security affairs, over which the two countries have bilateral Security Consultative Committee (2-plus-2) meetings of defense and foreign affair meetings, the channels of communication in the economic area are thin, the official pointed out.

The Japan-US Business Council has expressed a strong view calling

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for launching new talks at the private-sector level, while urging an early signing of an economic partnership agreement (EPA). The American Chamber of Commerce in Japan has proposed the notion of establishing a Japan-US cabinet-level forum of economic ministers, to be held twice year.

SCHIEFFER